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President Carter's strong statement on the United States' ability to verify Soviet compliance with the provisions of SALT II goes to the heart of the debate over ratification of the treaty.

The debate boils down to one legitimate issue: verification. If the Senate is satisfied that the U.S. can maintain adequate surveillance, it should ratify the treaty. It would be unthinkable to defeat the treaty for any other reason.

Many Americans have been justifiably concerned about and confused by varying theories on the value of the two electronic listening posts that we have lost in Iran. The Carter administration has added to the confusion by presenting inconsistent estimates of how long it would take to replace the Iranian radar sites.

Part of the problem here is a twist in interpretation. CIA Director Stansfield Turner testified at a closed hearing of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and he was quoted, in a convenient leak, as saying that the U.S. would not be able to fully replace the monitoring capabilities lost in Iran until 1984. This was erroneously interpreted as meaning the U.S. would not be able to monitor Soviet missile launches from the Caspian Sea and Aral Sea areas until 1984.

A few days later Defense Secretary Harold Brown said that even though regaining the *entire* monitoring capability of the Iran sites (which is what Turner actually was talking about) will take until 1983 or '84, the U.S. will have "enough of it to verify adequately Soviet compliance with the provisions of SALT II (in) about a year."

Thursday Mr. Carter stated flatly that the treaty "will be verifiable from the first day it is signed."

Evidence indicates that the President is not exaggerating. While we may not see all the launches, no Soviet missile will fly across the test range without being spotted by our satellites and our surface stations in the western Pacific.

The absence of the Iranian stations certainly will not permit the Soviets to produce new weapons systems without detection. Such things do not spring full-blown from the earth — they take time and must be built and developed in buildings and test sites that are detectable by photographic satellites and other systems.

"There is no question that any cheating which might affect our national security would be discovered in time for us to respond fully," Mr. Carter said.

Once the Senate is satisfied that the President's assessment is correct, the treaty should be ratified as quickly as possible. Rejection of the treaty would encourage the Soviets to embark on another nuclear arms race.

At best, that would be ruinous financially to both the Soviet Union and the United States.

At worst . . . We'd rather not think about that possibility.